Introduction

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Social Anthropology
Special Issue

Introduction: Crossing religious and ethnographic boundaries
The case for comparative reflection

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During a reading group discussion at Oxford, the three editors of this volume reflected on how 'religious others' would pop up, every now and again, in their fieldwork, but that they had struggled to pin down their presence in their ethnographic writing. Fesenmyer had frequently heard her Pentecostal interlocutors comment on the presence of Muslims in East London and elsewhere. Noting the Islamic madrassa that opened in the store front down the block from their church, for instance, they spoke of their own desire to start a school. Liberatore, conducting fieldwork amongst Somalis in London, was interested in how young people spoke about 'practising Islam' by invoking idioms of disjuncture, rupture, and event, which she found to be foundational to the development of the anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2014) but less of an interest to scholars of Islam. And, Maqsood, while working amongst upwardly mobile pious Muslims in Lahore, Pakistan, was always perplexed why her informants commonly brought up examples of Christians and Christian lives. In a context where Hindus are a historic and national 'other', with a small and, largely, downtrodden Christian presence, she was surprised at how often comparisons were made with, what her informants viewed as, 'Christians in the West' and their practices.

The impetus for this Special Issue comes from several directions. While each editor has conducted research with practitioners who identify with a specific religious tradition, Islam or Christianity, it was not until we convened the reading group that we became aware of our interlocutors' shared preoccupations: how to be good Christians or Muslims; how to live according to the Word of God or the Qur'an and the Sunnah; and how to reconcile religious commitments and other obligations and aspirations. The anthropology of Islam and the anthropology of Christianity reflect these empirical concerns in their attention to the moral or ethical life of pious individuals. However, despite these commonalities, there appears to be little conversation between the sub-disciplinary strands. Such monistic tendencies within the anthropology of religion have arguably side-lined attention to the interplay between

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people's religiosity and the wider, often multi-religious and non-religious, worlds they inhabit.

These similar preoccupations and shared theoretical interests have articulated with a flourishing of religion globally in the face of secular expectations of its decline (Casanova 1994). While religion's resurgence since the late 1970s may not surprise anthropologists, who recognise the centrality of religion to what it means to be human, anxieties about how people of different faiths coexist and concerns about religiously-inflected flashpoints across the globe have also proliferated during this time. Many such worries stem from an underlying presumption that religious differences are fertile ground for conflict. Outside anthropology, much research on religious pluralism is approached in terms of conflict or interfaith dialogue, either stressing war and violence or, alternatively, peace and tolerance. It also tends to be insufficiently grounded in the realities of the lived world. Without denying the historical and contemporary conflicts which play out along religious lines and are made sense of through religious idioms, it is too reductionist to approach religiosity in such binary terms.

Anthropology is uniquely situated to shed light on contemporary religiosity, its histories, and the many forms it takes because of its attention to how people live their religion, that is, 'what people *do* with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making' (Orsi 2003: 172, emphasis in original; Marsden 2005; Ammerman 2007; Janson and Meyer 2016). In examining sites of coexistence, imaginings of religious others, and the mixing and borrowing that occurs across religious (and non-religious) lines, anthropologists can and do illuminate the dynamic and ongoing construction of religious ideas, beliefs, and practices (cf. Janson and Meyer 2016). Such an approach stands in stark contrast to a notion of religion as a bounded and discrete system of internally consistent beliefs, which, in pluralist contexts, encounter one another as fully constituted religious traditions. Nonetheless, when studying people who identify with one religious tradition, the sub-disciplinary boundaries of the anthropology of Islam and of Christianity arguably obscure exploration and theorisation of inter-religious coexistence and encounters for people's lives and the societies in which they live. Conversely, anthropologists who take multi-religious encounters and settings as a starting point face a bifurcated field when it comes to theorising these lived experiences.

Monistic tendencies within the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity – whose development we trace below – have led to an unintended 'provincialization' of both geographical spaces and theoretical debates. In other words, particular themes have become limited to one sub-field and ignored by another, even though, as the discussion above suggests, they have ethnographic relevance. For example, discussions within anthropology of Islam on moral ambivalence and fragmentation echo concerns within the anthropology of Christianity on rupture, continuities, and discontinuities. In both sub-fields, attention is paid to the tensions and nuances 'between the world of daily life and the world of ultimate religious meaning' (Robbins 2003: 196). Yet, they have approached these questions through separate frameworks, and with little cross-fertilization. Similarly, the anthropological study of Muslims – 'good', 'bad', or struggling – tethered, as it is, to Foucauldian notions of ethical self-fashioning, is often a site for drawing out oppositions between secularism and piety.

Meanwhile, questions about Christianity's relationship with secularism and secularity are not an academic concern, despite a history of philosophical and legal debate on the topic.

We argue that these divisions – of academic labour, ideas and spaces – are problematic; they have contributed to the reification of sub-disciplinary, ethnographic, and religious boundaries and stalled the development of a theoretically robust anthropology of religion. At the same time, we are, of course, mindful of the irony in suggesting that the category of religion can advance efforts to de-provincialize the sub-fields. In the spirit of complicating these divisions, this Special Issue aims to stimulate thinking and reflection across these boundaries in an effort to grasp how people live their religion and, in doing so, how they relate to those of other religions and no religion. Accordingly, spanning sites in Asia, Europe, and Africa, the articles consider multi-religious settings, focusing in some cases on followers of the majority religion and, in others, on practitioners of a minority religion. Notably, rather than offering a broad spectrum of denominations within Islam and Christianity, most of the contributions focus on Sunni Islam and Pentecostalism, while two articles explore instances of what we might call religious creativity, which defy classification according to a world religion. Together, they are, in our view, indicative of the possibilities for cross-cutting discussion and comparison that are available if we choose to pursue them.

The anthropology of Islam and of Christianity: The making of sub-fields

The anthropology of Islam, as a distinct intellectual project, came hand in hand with a questioning of the category of 'religion', particularly in relation to its Christian roots. Starting with el-Zein's (1977) essay *Beyond ideology and theology: The search for the anthropology of Islam*, and Asad's (1986) *The idea of an anthropology of Islam*, the sub-discipline posits itself against the normative assumptions of secular-liberalism.[1] Nowhere has this agenda been more prominent than in the recent turn towards piety, where studies of ethical-self cultivation have allowed anthropologists to draw out the pervasiveness of liberal-secular norms both within their ethnographic contexts as well as in the academic study of Islam (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Agrama 2011; Fernando 2014). With regards to the latter, earlier academic work on Islam, which made connections between resurgence of religious practice and wider socio-political transformations (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Kepel 1985; Roy 1992) in the Muslim world, has been criticized for its instrumentalised outlook in which religion is reduced to identity politics (Deeb 2009; Maqsood 2017). In discussing this, Agrama (2011) argues that it takes the absence of religion from the modern public sphere as normative, and then tries to explain why this has not been the case in the Muslim world.

While the piety turn has made a key intervention by highlighting the problems of liberal-secular normativity in anthropology, it has – and rightly so – been criticized for over-privileging disciplinary practices (Osella and Osella 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Osella and Soares 2009), a critique that featured in a heated exchange (Fadil and Fernando 2015a, 2015b; Schielke 2015; Deeb 2015). In that discussion and elsewhere, Schielke (2009, 2012) and Deeb (2006; Deeb and Harb 2013) direct attention towards the ambivalences and fragmentation that often mark attempts at pious self-cultivation. Furthering this critique, we argue that, in its (over-)emphasis on ethical self-cultivation, the piety literature has inadvertently presented a singular Islamic tradition as the only way of being Muslim (see also Maqsood 2017). For example, in their counter-response, Fadil and Fernando (2015b) identify emotions and affects, such as, ambivalence and scepticism, as examples of humanist subjectivities.

Many others would argue, as Shahab Ahmad has done in his posthumous book *What is Islam?* (2015), that doubt, contradiction, and ambivalence are in fact central to many Muslim traditions, artistic expression, and intellectual and literary thought. By delineating such aspects of everyday life as belonging to the 'humanist tradition', the authors, whether they intend to or not, marginalize these aspects of Muslim traditions and privilege only the disciplinary and legalistic dimensions. Moreover, as Maqsood points out, such an approach – with its refusal to take account of connections with broader socio-political transformations – tends to 'echo orientalist imaginings of Islamic tradition as unchanging and timeless' (2017: 12).

If the anthropology of Islam has challenged the normative understandings through which Muslim practices are evaluated, the anthropology of Christianity as a 'self-conscious comparative project' (Robbins 2003: 191) has unravelled traces of itself in 'secular' categories of analysis. Similar to the anthropology of Islam, much of this work has concentrated on questioning the category of religion. In one of the first edited volumes on the topic, Fenella Cannell (2006) warned against assuming particular definitions, or making assumptions about, Christianity (cf. Frankiel 2003), while other work explored the ways in which Christianity has shaped anthropology as a discipline (Cannell 2005). Inspired by Weber, anthropologists have argued that the development of modernity has been intrinsically intertwined with Christianity (e.g. Keane 2007), and that the model of time accompanying modernity is inherited from Christian theology (Cannell 2005). Thus, while the anthropology of Islam has criticised the category of religion for not accounting for its difference from other religions (Asad 1986), the anthropology of Christianity has problematized it for borrowing too much from a 'Christianity focused on the ascetic' (Cannell 2005: 338) and generalizing it to all forms of the tradition.

Despite the similarity in their intellectual concern with religion, there has nonetheless been little discussion between the two sub-disciplines. Coming of age at a time when the anthropology of Islam was firmly established as a sub-field, the anthropology of Christianity has largely focused on developing shared questions and engaging with the same themes (Robbins 2003).[2] The sub-field has given rise to its own rich and expansive comparative project based on ethnographic research spanning Africa (e.g. Meyer 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Engelke 2007; Haynes 2017), Asia and Melanesia (e.g. Mosse 2012; Cannell 1999; Keane 2006; Scott 2005; Robbins 2004), and Latin America (e.g. O'Neill 2010; Vilaça 2016), as well as Europe and the United States (e.g. Coleman 2000; Engelke 2013; Strhan 2015; Harding 2000; Elisha 2011; Bialecki 2017). In many of these contexts, Christianity arrived through missionary activities, and anthropological work has understandably focused on conversion, rupture, and discontinuity, which continue to resonate as topics of interest (e.g. Brahinsky 2013; Daswani 2015; Vilaça 2014).

Admittedly, discussions in the anthropology of Christianity have been more 'open' than those in Islam; for instance, there have been voices, which have questioned the need to isolate and study major traditions, instead of proceeding on the basis of problems (Hann 2007: 406), and others that have highlighted the importance of the history of encounters between monotheistic traditions and believers' awareness of other religions (Frankiel 2003: 288-289). More recently, in reflecting on the current state of the anthropology of Christianity, which he sees as having reached 'middle-age', Joel Robbins (2014) highlights emergent areas in the

sub-field, including interest in those who are ambivalent or tenuously committed Christians (as opposed to strongly self-identified ones, as has been the norm) and to Christianity's boundaries and, thus, to what can be counted as 'Christian'. However, the dominant trend has not been to compare across religions, to explore religious coexistence or, for that matter, to introduce new categories of analysis (borrowed from other sub-disciplines) in the study of Christianity.[3]

In this way, Schielke's (2010) criticism of the anthropology of Islam can be extended to the anthropology of Christianity: both sub-fields have become excessively preoccupied with defining their fields of study and focusing on the most committed of believers. In doing so, they theoretically reinforce the boundary-marking between Christianity and Islam in which believers themselves engage. This has in turn reinforced a separation between Islam and Christianity and stalled comparative work.

… and the un-bounding of these sub-fields

With respect to both the anthropology of Islam and of Christianity, this Special Issue is certainly not calling for their demise. We value the work that has been done in both fields and, in particular, in allowing anthropology to confront its past. Rather, it is to suggest another phase in their respective evolutions, one which encourages their mutual engagement. Given the colonial genealogy and sedimented assumptions of 'religion', the dismantling of 'religion' as an area of study can be viewed as part of the larger scholarly agenda to 'provincialize' Europe (Chakrabarty 2000) and its categories of analysis. And, in many ways, the development of the anthropology of Islam represents this shift, offering a method of inquiry that does not burden itself with questions and concerns, which stem from European/Christian assumptions about belief, practice and ritual (Asad 1986; Mahmood 2001; Henkel 2005; Fadil 2013). However, the lack of comparison engendered by this disciplinary shift has had consequences that run counter to this larger agenda of 'de-centring' Europe and of exorcising ghosts of the colonial past in anthropological study.

The overarching presence of these (sub-)disciplinary frameworks has meant that contemporary ethnographic work on religion has itself become 'provincialized', in that it remains limited to 'frontal' and 'lateral' comparisons within a specific religion or tradition (Candea 2016). The full comparative potential that the discipline of anthropology has to offer remains unexplored. Here, we stress the merits of comparison by drawing out and questioning what are often standard ways of approaching the study of religion in particular areas. For instance, a comparison between ethnographic work in Africa and in South Asia can foster debate on what is considered the 'norm' in each context, and why. Why does anthropology take religious plurality in Africa as given – Africa has always been plural – and self-explanatory? In contrast, why is the starting point of religious inquiry in South Asia usually a specific sect, movement or group and cross-overs need to be qualified and explained? Such questions, engendered through comparative work, can invite discussion on whether these frames are related to earlier colonial interests and understandings of the region and whether new/ borrowed frames and concepts can work, on their own or in tandem, to illuminate other aspects of religious and social life.

Our intention, here, is not to return to earlier instrumentalist accounts, which reduce religion to identity politics, nor is it to suggest that there is a single thing called Islam or Christianity. Rather, we want to acknowledge, more explicitly, the open quality (Khan 2012) of religious discourses. Religious ideologies and ideas – like other forms of knowledge – do not fully determine subjectivities (Liberatore 2017). They are also 'discursively produced' (Asad 1986), and often through transnational discourse (Deeb 2019:13), in conversation with local competing political ideologies (Iqtidar 2012; Hefner 2000), and class hierarchies (Maqsood 2017), as well as wider social and economic changes (Soares 2006; Osella and Osella 2009; 2012; Meyer 1999; Marshall 2009; Cole 2010; Daswani 2015; Strhan 2015; Fesenmyer 2016). This inevitably means a 'borrowing' across other religions and ideologies, the flows and contours of which can only be explored through greater comparative work.[4] In addition, this kind of comparison possesses the potential to inform anthropology about transformations beyond 'religion'. For instance, the rise of NASFAT (Articles 2 and 3 in this issue), a movement in Nigeria that straddles Islam and Christianity, tells us as much about religious borrowing, as much as it does about how young people cope with neoliberal precarity, risk, and uncertainty.

Overview of contributions

While many (religious) interlocutors invoke 'us' versus 'them' comparisons, anthropology has much to offer in unpicking how the 'us' often entails the blurring and mixing of various religions and ideologies. By engaging in 'lateral' comparisons of multi-religious encounters within particular contexts, as well as by thinking comparatively on a global scale, we aim to generate new questions and considerations in how we study religion. Accordingly, the articles span diverse contexts, ranging from India to Guinea Bissau, and from the United Kingdom to Nigeria. While they are each based on original ethnographic research in a multi-religious context, they take different approaches to stimulating thought and dialogue beyond the anthropology of *a* religion (Hausner, this issue).

The first three contributions focus on practitioners of a specific religious tradition, particularly those aspiring, upwardly mobile believers who seek to reconcile their faith with other aspirations. Set against and in relation to the wider (religiously) plural urban contexts in which they live their religion, the articles explore what it means for Pentecostal Christians in London and Muslims in Kerala, India and Lagos, Nigeria to coexist with religious and non-religious others and how they do so. In her article, ***Fesenmyer*** describes how born-again Christian migrants from Kenya find in Pentecostal thought and discourse ways to strive for success and salvation, without compromising their devotion to God, in a country they believe has left the Kingdom of God. Notably, their Muslim neighbours, who they view as a threat to historically Christian Britain, offer an unlikely model to emulate for living their religion in convivial East London. Pentecostalism thus facilitates the integration of their differing aspirations, rather than contributing to an existential sense of fragmentation. In drawing on existential anthropology, Fesenmyer proposes an approach to studying followers of a religious tradition in pluralist settings that takes into account religious and non-religious others and ideas in their midst.

Janson considers a similar problematic to Fesenmyer, albeit through a study of NASFAT (Nasrul-Lah-il Fathi Society of Nigeria), one of Nigeria's largest contemporary religious organisations. In the precarious context of Lagos and its competitive religious landscape, NASFAT, she argues, borrows from Pentecostalism – its prayer styles, missionary techniques,

media practices, and organizational strategies – to attract adherents, largely aspiring middle class young Muslims, intent on reconciling Islam with modern society. Given that belief and practice, or content and form, are dialogic, encountering different faiths is inevitable in a multi-religious setting like Lagos, thus necessitating an approach that moves away from the monism which predominates in the anthropology of religion. Through a comparative framework focused on religious practice and lived experience, Janson argues that such borrowing and mixing does not erase religious boundaries, but rather re-asserts their ongoing significance.

Turning to India and Nigeria, ***Osella and Soares*** explore what they call Islam mondain or 'lived' Islam, paying attention to intra-Muslim differences as well as to how religiosity is formed and experienced through encounters with diverse Others. Their departure point is the concern that a focus on ethics in the anthropology of Islam has obscured attention to the implications of religious coexistence and to the macro-political contexts in which Muslims live. Through their focus on lived religiosity, they 'trace the articulation of Islamic discursive traditions within the broader social, cultural, political, and economic environments in which they are debated and gain wider plausibility' in Kerala and Lagos. Their historically attuned approach necessitates recognition of the ways in which residual and emergent forms of religiosity are both contained within and exceed hegemonic modalities of religiosity, generating new religious practices, relations, and configurations. Together, their article and those of Fesenmyer and Janson illuminate the value of adopting a wider lens, both empirically and theoretically, than the anthropology of *a* religion encourages.

The next two contributions identify common ground in multi-religious settings through a focus on shared socio-religious practices – namely, marriage in Yorubaland and prayer in Guinea Bissau – and the social values which they simultaneously express and affirm. In doing so, the articles reveal the religious premise of conviviality. In her article, ***Nolte*** outlines the centrality of marriage not only to individual social status in the small towns and villages of Yorubaland, but also to the constitution of religious communities such that marrying across religious boundaries is preferable to remaining single. She explores ethnographically the contradiction between recognising that interfaith marriage contributes to social wellbeing, while nonetheless being something that people wish to avoid. Such marriages, she argues, paradoxically both confirm and undermine the assumption of stable boundaries – or incompatibility – between Muslims and Christians. Meanwhile, ***Sarro and Temudo*** offer an ethnographic account of *Kyangyang*, a prophetic movement among the Balanta, which emerged in the mid-1980s in rural Guinea Bissau where 'prayer' is both a practice and an idiom central to social and religious life. Otherwise known as people who do not pray, the Balanta engage in mimetic religious practices that are part of a larger transformational process. Despite criticism from their Muslim and Christian neighbours that it is a 'fake religion' due to its mimetic practices, Sarro and Temudo argue that *Kyangyang* offers the Balanta alternative imaginings and models for organising themselves that depart from historically rigid gerontocratic structures. In other words, by using the languages of power and community which others use, the Balanta creatively engage in mimesis as a tool to fight for recognition and as a means of participating politically. Understanding a religious movement like Kyangyang demands attention to the wider spiritual ecology within which it emerges. Their article, along with that of Nolte, is suggestive of how to approach the study of pluralist

settings, while also illustrating religion's salience as 'social glue', to use Sarro and Temudo's phrase, in such convivial contexts.

In the last article, ***Hausner*** provides an ethnographically-informed reflection on the possibilities and pitfalls of comparative projects in the anthropology of religion. Taking the distinction between religion as category and practice as central to such endeavours, she considers the dilemma to which a focus on a single tradition studied in its multiplicity around the globe gives rise – do such efforts downgrade critical inquiries regarding when something is classified as Muslim, Christian, or Buddhist in favour of asserting the category as an overarching concept? By way of illustration, she examines a ritual gathering in the London borough of Southwark where a community of counter-cultural artists and seekers engage in a complex mix of Christian-pagan-Zen-Indic-neo-Egyptian practices. While the ritual looks like a religion – bringing together, as it does, like-minded people who commune at a set time and place – practitioners are disinterested in being classified as part of any 'world religion', just as in the case of Kyangyang adepts in Sarro and Temudo's article. In this way, Hausner encourages us to re-visit the difference between the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of *a* religion. Has the former become the field where examples of religious creativity that defy categorisation into one religious tradition or another are considered? In other words, has it become the space for the religiously unclassifiable? If so, what are the implications for theorising about religion generally?

Collating this Special Issue has reminded us of the importance of picking up and drawing on ideas and concepts that might not necessarily be found in the religious traditions and the bodies of literature with which we work, and to 'test' them in different field sites. This sort of comparative work forces us beyond sub-disciplinary strands to explore connections between ethnographic realities and probe why these might exist and what they might say about the lives we share with others.

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1 Anthropological work on Islam had been conducted prior to this (e.g. Geertz 1968), but it had not been articulated as part of a distinct intellectual project.

2 Dating the start of an anthropological movement is inevitably a contested exercise. With that in mind, it is important to note the ‘far from inconsequential corpus’ of research on Christian populations (Hann 2007: 394) produced prior to Joel Robbins’ assertion that there had yet to be an anthropology of Christianity ‘for itself’ (Robbins 2003: 191; for earlier examples, see Glazier 1980; James and Johnson 1988; Barker 1990; Hefner 1993).

3 Recent notable exceptions to the first two points include Julie Cassaniti and Tanya Luhrmann’s (2014) comparison of Thai Theravada Buddhism and charismatic evangelical Christians; and Andreas Bandak’s (2014) exploration of Christians living alongside their majority Muslim neighbours in Damascus.

4 Important efforts in this direction include Das (2010), Peel (2016), Soares (2006), Nolte, Ogen, and Jones (2017).